

The Priest and the Thief

by Ace of All Trades

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Summary: She's changed so much since she first joined their party. Little does he know that he's changed too. She makes him want to do better - to be better.

1. Chapter 1

If someone were to tell him that he was to be the leader of their party a few weeks ago, Haruhiro probably would have laughed at them.

He liked to think that he was a pretty realistic person who didn't wallow in his own self-delusions. He was average. Maybe he was even on the lower quartile of average if he were being honest. Standing at 165 cm, he was shorter than Manato's 178 cm tall stature, and dwarfed by Moguzo's massive 185 cm figure. He possessed a rather average face with dull brown hair and even duller brown eyes. Nothing about him particularly stood out either, which he supposed could be good or bad. He wasn't charismatic like Manato. He was painfully shy and awkward, and struggled to hold a conversation with someone he didn't know.

To sum it up: Haruhiro wasn't leadership material in the slightest. Now, if he was the Haruhiro from a few weeks ago, he would have simply accepted the fact, and try to elect someone else in his stead to lead. Except so many things had happened since then.

Perhaps the biggest thing being Manato. A day he will never forget.

_Haruhiro looked down at Manato's prone form. He was sweating profusely and wheezing loudly, each labored breath seemed to cause more blood to dribble out the side of his mouth. _

"_Manato, tell us! What should we do?" He pleads his eyes wide with

fear. His entire body is shaking. Manato tries to speak, but instead gurgles something incoherent, flecks of blood splatter onto his face.

—

Tears are streaming down Manato's face; his eyes are clouded with pain, and focus on him. A shaky hand slowly reaches out to him.

—

"Sor..ry" Manato croaks, more tears welling up and rolling down his sweaty and grimy face. He grabs the trembling hand and squeezes, absentmindedly noting how weak Manato's grip is. —

"What? Why are you apologizing? What, Manto? What?" He demands hysterically. Manato weakly pulls him close, so that their noses are almost touching. His eyes lock with his own. There is such determination, pain and sadness within them. —

"Counting on you" —

"Counting on me? Counting on me to what? You have to tell me or I won't know!" Despite the tears and the pain and the blood, Manato's lips quirk up in a weak smile, before his face slackens and the life leaves his eyes. The rest of his body relaxes, and he sinks into Mogzo's armored lap. —

"Manato! Manato! No way. Manato!" He screams. Think. What can he do? He turns to the nearest person. "W-we have to stop the blood. And do mouth-to mouth!" —

The demand jolts the rest of the group into action. Yume scrambles to make a bandage out of her cape, while Yume fumbles into her pack for any curatives. —

"The arrow, we need to pull it out!" —

"Lay him down gently!" —

The rest of that day was sort of a blur to him. He remembers trying to resuscitate him for almost an hour. He remembers how they rushed their leader to the Arch-Priest's temple.

"Please, I beg of you! Please save Manato!" He implores, falling to his knees and prostrating himself before the Arch-Priest. "I'll do anything, so please! PLEASE!" —

The Arch-Priest briskly whisks by his sunken form and gently lays Manato's body on the altar. —

"Please" he cries. He watches as the old priest look down on his leader's body, laying a hand on Manato, assessing the damage. But instead of performing a spell, which is what Haruhiro expected, the priest lowers his hands, releasing slow sigh. —

"Why? WHY NOT?!" He screams. Fury and despair and sadness and grief all coursing through his veins. The Arch-Priest turns to him, his face seemed even older, if that was possible. When they locked eyes, he saw a deep weariness and sadness "this old man had seen the worst of what the world had to offer. —

"No one can bring the dead back to life." —

"_No. This must be a mistake," he mutters to himself, hoping "PRAYING" that this was all just a bad joke. "Yes, we let our guard down a little back there. But| but, we managed to scrape by today, too."_

_He doesn't even know what he's saying at this point. But Mogzo gently pries him away from the Arch Priest, and it seems like all the energy leaves his body. He sags into Mogzo. _

"_You must give him a proper funeral," the Arch-Priest says heavily. "Those who are not buried properly turn into the No Life King's servants"_

"_A-are you saying we need to c-cremate Manato?" Mogzo asks._

"_That is correct," the Arch-Priest replies stoically. Hearing that, a cold fury washes over him. He pushes Mogzo away from him. He glares at the old man. Hating him for how indifferent he seemed to be._

"_And I assume| that costs money?" He asks lowly, barely containing the mounting rage. _

"_If you don't have the funds, I will " The Arch-Priests flat, emotionless tone caused something to snap._

"_NO!" He snarls. He wouldn't take this man's money. Not now. Not ever. The Arch-Priest's glower at his disrespect quelled his anger somewhat. _

"_No thank you," he says again in a quieter tone. "Manato is my| is our|"_

_He couldn't finish. He choked on his own words as tears blurred his vision. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop them. He clenches his eyes and lowers his head, ashamed at revealing weakness in front of this cold, emotionless man. He took a shuddering breath.
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"_Our| friend."_

Haruhiro would never forget how he felt.

Ironically enough, what made him finally fully embrace his role as the party's leader was Ranta.

"_Don't give up!"_ That's right. He's not going to give up, and he will keep living. But he'll do it to the best of his ability - which was partially why he was sitting in one of a caf  overlooking the small city with several tomes and books about hunters, dark knights, knights, mages, and priests.

It had been several days after their foray into the Cyrene Mine, and he decided that he really didn't know much about the classes of his other friends. So while his teammates were off doing whatever, he decided to stop by all the other guilds, and learn about the basics of each of them. After gathering all the books and speaking to the right guild masters, he found a small caf  nestled in the upper tiers of the city, ordered himself some coffee, and promptly began to

dig into the books.

While Haruhiro wasn't much of a talker, he was an avid reader. For some reason, he always found it more relaxing staring up at the stars, or reading a good book. While he enjoyed fantasy and fiction, the tomes provided by the guild master provided interesting insights into the roles, training, and trials and tribulations that each of his teammates had to undergo in order to become journeymen in their trade. He made sure to carefully take notes about certain aspects of the class " its limitations, benefits, paradigms. That's another thing he was proud of " his handwriting. His inherently steady hands which were used for lockpicking and other skilled tasks afforded him neat handwriting as well. There was something immeasurably pleasing about looking at neat, evenly spaced, and consistently sized script.

It was around late afternoon, and the sun cast a warm orange glow throughout the city, and reflected off the ocean, setting the city aglow with hues of orange, yellow, and blue. Currently, he was reading one of the tomes about priests.

The Mage does not fare well against most enemies that come within close proximity. Most enemies tend to kill Mages within a few strikes since most enemies inflict physical damage. Long range attack can also interrupt a Mages' cast time and are particularly deadly. _

He felt a pang, as he read more about a Mage's exploitable weaknesses. If only he had known back this, then he wouldn't have had Manato fight in the front with the rest of them. He was so stupid! He would have kept him in the back with Shihoru. If onlyâ€|_mrrrowwww_

Haruhiro looked down, to see a badger snuffling at his feet. He smiled as the tip of its wet nose gently nudged at his boot.

"There you are Pan-san, I've beenâ€| ohâ€| Haru?" a soft female voice said behind him. Haruhiro looked up to see the owner of the voice: a lean girl in a white sundress that accentuated her figure nicely. The dying sun caught into dark hair, making it appear more dark blue than black, and deep sapphire-colored eyes that seemed to twinkle. Standing before Haruhiro was none other than Mary, the team's resident priest.

Her normally stoic face was softened with a look of curiosity laced with a hint of surprise.

"Hey Mary," Haruhiro greeted back, offering her a small wave. He noted the page he was on, before carefully closing the thick tome. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question. You've been gone all day, and I was wondering where you went."

Haruhiro motioned for the seat next to him. Mary flashed him a small smile before gracefully sliding into the seat.

"I was catching up on some readings," Haruhiro explained, motioning towards the pile of tomes and books on the table.

"Oh?" Mary peered at the cover of the tome. "Planning to become I

priest I see."

"Wha-? No! I wouldn'tâ€¦" He sputtered, looking at her with wide eyes. He saw the slight uptick of her lips, and the way her eyes sparkled mischievously at him. "Ohâ€¦ you're joking. Hehe."

"I just thought it would be a good idea to learn about everyone's classes and abilities. I know it may sound dumb or creepy, but maybe I can understand everyone better if I can understand how they fightâ€¦" He trailed off self-consciously. He averted his eyes and stared at the books while nervously scratching the back of his head.

"I think that's a great idea," Mary disagreed lightly. His eyes tentatively slid up to look at her. His breath caught as he looked at the gentle smile she aimed at him. He felt his face heat up, and he quickly averted his gaze to the sunset.

"Everybody has things they aren't good at or can't do. We cover each other's weakness. That's what a party's for," Haruhiro murmured pensively, parroting the exact words that Manato had told them. Mary nodded, silently looking out across the valley.

"Since I am here, and I am a priest, is there anything you would like to know about the class?" Mary asked, breaking the silence between them.

"Uh â€" yeahâ€¦ I mean yes please! That would be great actually. I wasn't quite sure about how you replenish your magic. The book didn't go into much detail," Haruhiro responded eagerly.

"Okay. So meditationâ€¦"

Haruhiro closely watched her as she explained meditation and what it did for priests. However, he was only half-paying attention to what she was saying, and absentmindedly scribbling down notes on what she said. Instead, he was watching as she calmly spoke, her eyes reminded him of a lake, tranquil but with such a great depth to it. There was a certain life to her that she lacked when they had first met. The small gesture of her hands when she spoke, and the way her face relaxed ever so slightly, warming her icy exterior. Even her once unfriendly and cold voice had thawed, revealing a quiet, yet pleasing intonation. He found himself admiring her.

"â€¦Haru?" Mary's soft tone broke him out of his reverie. "Is everything okay? You were staring. "

"Ah â€" uh," He stammered, embarrassed and surprised at being caught.

"It's just that you've changed since we first met you," Haruhiro said quietly, hoping she wouldn't take it the wrong way. "You're so strong. I â€" I just want you to know that."

Mary looked taken aback by his sudden statement. Her eyes widened for a fraction of a second, before they softened, and a small smile graced her features.

"Haru, I â€¦" Mary began, but was cut off by the evening bell, signaling that nighttime was beginning. Haruhiro looked at the deep

purple sky and dying orange light, and was shocked to see how much time had passed. He stood up.

"It seems like it's almost time to meet with the rest of our party. Shall we?"

Mary opened her mouth as if to say something, but then closed it. She smiled softly to herself.

"Sure. Let's go."

2. Chapter 2

The cool night air nipped at his exposed skin, causing a smattering of goose bumps to erupt. That's one of the issues with spring, he mused. When the sun went down, it became immeasurably cold, but when the sun was up, it was too warm for a coat. His light jacket did little to prevent the night air from seeping into his body. He shivered, and wrapped his jacket tighter around his body.

Mary strode next to him in companionable silence, having changed into her slightly thicker green and black attire. She didn't seem to be the least bit fazed by the cold, he noted enviously, though she normally didn't seem to be fazed by anything, so there wasn't much credence to the fact that she looked unbothered. By this time, the pitch black of the night was gently warded away by the warm glow of the oil lanterns and the sounds of evening merriment rolled through the air with the cool breeze. Though it was early in the evening, Haruhiro already passed several people who had clearly over-indulged in their spirits. The city was once again coming to life.

He enjoyed walking around the city, exploring the various nuances and experiences that it had to offer. If he didn't explore, he would never have found out about the kind street vendor who made the most amazing braised beef kabobs, or the small café that was famous for serving their chamomile-chrysanthemum hot tea. The city had a personality of its own, and he reveled in unraveling it. Even their housing in the volunteer soldiers quarters. Right now, he didn't feel ready to leave it. Despite the fact that it was cold and drafty during the winter and unbearably hot during the summer, he had come to call the place his home, where he and his friends lived.

Whoever he was before coming here, he knew he must not have been the most popular guy in school. He often found himself uncomfortable with large crowds and social events, eschewing such social interaction. He couldn't remember if he had any friends before, but he knew that he had someone special to him before — a best friend that seemed to leave a small tightening in his chest whenever he thought about them. He winced as the sounds of the alehouse Ranta was so fond of started getting louder and louder. The shouts and overly-exuberant laughter of intoxicated people grated on his ears. He never did feel comfortable here. He finds it funny how Ranta always brags about finding and meeting so many friends here despite his abrasive personality. Which, he supposes is true. Ranta knows a wide variety of people. Haruhiro on the other hand really only knows his friends in his party. It seems like the only way people meet is through drinking and partying, Haruhiro mused. He wasn't much of a partyer — so what did that make him? A loner? He certainly didn't have the easy charisma of Manato that allowed him to effortlessly approach and

charm people.

Haruhiro pulled open the door, feeling a rush of hot air rush out of the building and disperse into the cool night.

"After you."

Haruhiro follows Mary into the alehouse, closely following her as she navigates through the throngs of people milling about. It was pretty busy tonight. Flustered waiters and waitresses flitted by, trying to reach all the hollering customers demanding more food or drink. He's impressed at how fast they move about, considering how slick the wood floor is with spilled alcohol.

"Oiii! Har-u-hi-ro!" Haruhiro cringes as he hears Kikkawa, the gregarious warrior from Tokimune's party, shouting his name from across the room. After a brief debate about whether or not he should pretend to ignore him, Haruhiro reluctantly turned and faced the man. He gave a half-hearted wave, but was beckoned over. As he slipped past people and draws near, he sees that there were two girls on either side of Kikkawa. They were also rather attractive, he notes absentmindedly.

"Hey Kikkawa," Haruhiro greets. "What's up?"

"Heeyyy man!" Kikkawa yells back, clearly having had a little bit too much to drink. In fact, Haruhiro reflects, he doesn't remember a time when they spoke where Kikkawa wasn't drunk. Kikkawa flashes him a disarming grin. "Soooo, I was just talking to these fiiiine ladies about how you defeated ol'SpotDeathâ€|DateSpots? Death Spots! Singlehandedly!"

The girls latched onto Kikkawa's arm nodded enthusiastically. Smiling and eyeing him.

"Is that true?!" one girl asked, her eyes wide with awe. Haruhiro coughed awkwardly, feeling his cheeks heat up at the sudden attention.

"Uhâ€| yeah? I mean I had some help, butâ€|" he mumbled bashfully. He could hear their twittering laughs.

"He's so funny!"

"And modest! From what Kikki here tells us, you're quite the fighter," another girl says. Her friend's blonde ponytail bobbed up and down as she nodded her head vigorously in agreement. "I would really like to know you better."

Haruhiro choked, and flashed Kikkawa a desperate look. He was way out of his depth here. Kikkawa, oblivious to Haruhiro's distress, gave him a thumbs up and a go get 'em look.

"Well, I think I see Ranta! I'm just going toâ€| go. Let's go Sylvie." Kikkawa flashed him another wink before taking one girl and disappearing into the thick of the crowd, leaving him with the other three girls.

"Waitâ€|" Haruhiro called out desperately, trying to escape with him. His escape was blocked, when he felt a soft hand rest on his

chest.

"We've never officially met," the blond girl said lowly, her fingers picking softly at the material of his jacket. "My name is Eris."

"H-h-Haruhihiro. My name is Haruhihiro," he stammers. The girl was very attractive, with a form fitting dress that accentuated her curves in all the right places. Her long, athletic legs complimented her lean and athletic body. Surprisingly, her dress was also rather conservative, covering much of her body. Her strawberry blonde hair was smooth and flowed down the back of her slender neck, and rested on one side of her shoulder. It was a testament to his self-control that he managed to not let his eyes rest on her body for longer than it was polite. He decided to keep his gaze on her face. Which wasn't that hard.

"You know, you're really cute when you blush like this," Eris murmured, flashing him another dazzling smile.

"Oh- uh really?" He asks, genuinely surprised. He doesn't recall any girl ever finding him the least bit attractive.

"Really," Eris affirms. She takes a step closer, and soon their faces are almost inches apart. She is so close that he can see the flecks of gold scattered around her wide, sea-green colored eyes. Even in the hot room, he's almost positive he can feel her hot breath wisp around his face. "Honestly, I noticed you before you became a celebrity, but it's only now that I gathered the courage to talk to you."

"I'm not a celebrity," Haruhihiro demurred. "It really was just a do or die situation."

"Well regardless, I would still like the story from you."

"O-okay."

Just then, Haruhihiro felt the hot and stifling room drop to sub-zero, and felt an ominous presence behind him. He froze as he heard a voice, cold as ice speak behind him.

"Haruhihiro."

"Y-yes?" He squeaked, slowly turning around to see Mary behind him. Her icy blue eyes bore mercilessly into his own, causing him to shrink down in fear. Her lips were drawn into a thin, disapproving line, and her face rearranged into an emotionless mask. A chiseled face of cold beauty. Her face was devoid of any warmth that he had seen in the past few days. It seemed like other patrons took notice of her icy aura, as there seemed to be a three feet space between her and the next person. Bystanders shied away from her in fear, like scared creatures.

And Haruhihiro? He was the poor soul that was trapped by her icy gaze.

"We have our meeting at this time."

"O-ohh right."

"Awww," Eris pouted cutely. "Can't you skip for just today? Maybeâ€|"

"â€|No," Mary cut her off flatly. Her voice leaving no room for argument. Even Eris looked taken aback.

"Ah well," Eris sighed disappointedly. "Can't blame a girl for trying."

"Yeah, I really can't miss this meeting with our party," Haruhiro said apologetically.

"D'you think we can meet up later or something?" Eris asked hopefully, her eyes wide and earnest.

"Y-yeah. If you want."

"Then it's a date! See ya!" Eris exclaimed, before waving. Haruhiro managed a small wave, before Mary tugged him away.

"Ahâ€| sorry about that Mary," Haruhiro said contritely. He hoped to soothe the priest's cold fury, and made a mental note to never be late again. Punctuality always mattered to her, he remembers, though she never got this mad about tardiness before. "Thank you for reminding me about our meeting."

Mary nodded her head tersely. Everyone was still giving her a wide berth. He put a hand on her shoulder.

"Seriously, Mary. I'm really sorry. Please forgive me?" Haruhiro pleaded softly. Mary glanced at his hand. Then she sighed, deflating, and relaxed her posture.

"You're forgiven," she said softly. "The rest of our party is seated over in the second floor. Follow me."

She grabbed his hand, and led him through the room. All the while, Haruhiro couldn't help but notice how soft her hands were.

"Ah! Haruhiro! Mary! There you guys are!" Yume called out. She was the first to notice them and perked up to greet them. The second floor of the alehouse was noticeably quieter, which Haruhiro was immensely grateful for. He didn't feel like shouting over the other patrons.

"Hey guys," Haruhiro returned, sliding into the bench next to Mogzo. Mary sat opposite of him, next to Ranta. It already seemed like he had a bit to drink. After everyone ordered food from the waiter, Haruhiro turned to the group.

"So now that we've had a little time off, I figured we should start looking for new hunting grounds to try and follow up on. Thoughts?"

"I think that's a great idea!" Yume cheered. "I'm starting to become a crazy stir!"

"Stir-crazy," Haruhiro corrected absentmindedly.

"I think so as well," Mogzo agreed. "I think some other warriors mentioned Damuro. More goblins raiding parties seem to be coming from that area."

"Goblins?" Ranta scoffed. "We can do so much better than that! We killed Death Spots. We should look for better enemies to kill. I need more of a challenge."

Haruhiro felt a spike of annoyance at Ranta, but kept it in check.

"Where would we go to find more of a 'challenge'?" Haruhiro asked.

"How should I know?" Ranta demanded. "I'm not a map-maker. All I'm saying is that we need better enemies."

"Umâ€¦ I'm okay with anything," Shihoru added faintly.

"What about bounties?" Mary suggested. Posted bounties could update them on possible high value creatures that needed slaying. He was torn. On one hand, they could prey on the goblin raiding parties. While they weren't the strongest, they would provide a reliable inflow of coin. On the other hand, they could take a chance and risk going for harder enemies, but receive a greater reward.

"Pardon the intrusion, but are you the party that slew Death Spots?" A smooth, male voice asked. The party turned to look at the new-comer. He was a tall, thin man with messy black hair and round spectacles.

"That's us," Haruhiro confirmed. "And you are?"

"Forgive me," the man said smoothly. "My name is Shiroe. And you must be Haruhiro."

"I am. Is there anything we can do for you?" Haruhiro asked warily.

"Yes, actually. You see, I represent a prominent mining company, and thanks to your party, we see an opportunity. One that would be most beneficialâ€¦"

"â€¦get on with it," Ranta cut in disinterestedly.

"Ranta!" Yume smacked him. "Rude!"

"Ow! Ya damn flat-chest, stop hitting me!"

"Don't call me. Flat. Chested!"

"OW!"

Instead of get mad, like Haruhiro expected, the man merely smiled and adjusted his glasses.

"My company has been looking to expand and tap into the abundance of minerals and metals in the Cyrene mines. As I am sure you have noticed, the kobolds have already access to some refining machinery.

It makes it the prime place to set up new mining operations. Death Spots," Shiroe continued. "Was our last main obstacle that prevented us from establishing ourselves there. But with him gone, it seems like there is a very real chance that we can form a mining settlement there."

"That's great," Haruhiro said slowly. He actually found himself agreeing with Ranta for once. "But what does this have to do with us?"

"We would like to hire your party to clear out the rest of level four for us. We previously hired other parties to completely clear out the first few floors, but they have encountered strong resistance on floor four. From reports submitted by the other parties, it seems like there may be twenty at most remaining in the pack."

"There were way more than twenty the last time we were there," Mary pointed out.

"Yes, well it seems that after Death Spots' death, a combination of infighting for determining the next alpha, and efforts from our hired parties have greatly depleted their number," Shiroe informed them. "This venture will benefit not just us, but this city as well. Think about it. With the threat of the kobolds eradicated, everyone here will be safer. Not only that, but with increased access to minerals and metals, we can begin extracting them and processing them into more weapons and armor for adventurers and soldiers like yourselves."

"What's in it for us?" Ranta questioned bluntly.

"Naturally, you and your entire party will be compensated. Very well I might add."

"What price are we talking, exactly?" Ranta asked, leaning in, and clearly interested.

"A base fee of 15 gold coins for clearing the first four levels of the Cyrene Mine, and up to an additional 5 gold for any expenses that you may incur during that period of time," Shiroe offered.

"Is that all?" Ranta scoffed.

"I would say that's a generous offer," Shiroe remarked.

"For any party, yes. But we're not just any party. We slew Death Spots! Our talents are highly sought after," Ranta bragged. "In fact, we were just going to find a bounty that paid at least 30 gold! We should get a minimum of 25 gold."

"That unfortunately would be too high," Shiroe disagreed. "We could always find another party to do the jobâ€¦."

"But could they do as good a job as us?" Ranta questioned, grinning at Shiroe. Both seemed to be enjoying themselves. "Renji's team is out, and do you know any other party that could guarantee success? If we could take out Death Spots, what makes you think any other lesser creature would stand a chance?"

"You did say that the multiple teams you hired couldn't clear out the

fourth floor," Haruhiro pointed out.

"Exactly!" Ranta said triumphantly. "Why spend more on multiple teams when you can get us to do it?"

"You drive a hard bargain. 20 gold and I won't go any higher," Shiroe said firmly.

"Deal," Ranta declared.

"Wait! Ranta! We still haven't decided as a group!" Haruhiro protested, annoyed that Ranta would just make a decision without waiting for the rest of the group.

"Shut up Haruhiro! You think too much and take too long to decide."

"I wouldn't mind doing this," Mogzo added.

"I think this would be fun!" Yume declared. Shihoru nodded timidly beside her. Haruhiro turned and looked at Mary, silently asking for her decision. After a second, she slowly nodded her head.

"It seems like a good plan."

"See!" Ranta crowed. "Maybe I should be leader!"

Shiroe produced a rolled up parchment. He scribbled something towards the bottom of the paper, before handing it to Haruhiro.

"Here are the amended terms to our contract. This stipulates exactly what will transpire in our agreement. Basically, you clear out up to level four, and you get paid," Shiroe explained.

Haruhiro carefully read through the contract, making sure that everything was as Shiroe said.

"New Horizon Company?" Haruhiro read. Haruhiro handed it to Mary to double check.

"Anyone else want to read the terms before we agree?" Haruhiro asked. Ranta snatched the parchment and signed his name.

"Stupid Haruhiro. A real man wouldn't bother with this stupid contract stuff. A true man would be held by his word." Shiroe chuckled.

"In an ideal world, yes. But it never hurts to be too careful."

After everyone signed their paper, Shiroe rerolled the paper and tucked it into his robe.

"It was a pleasure doing business with you," he said formally, bowing. "I look forward to working with you."

And with that, Shiroe left.

Haruhiro rubbed his eyes, suddenly feeling a wave of exhaustion hit him. Too much interaction with people, he thought.

"Well, I think then we know what we'll be doing next," Haruhiro remarked. "I'm really tired, so I think we can probably adjourn this meeting."

"I'm tired too!" Yume piped up. "I think me and Shihoru are going to bed too!"

"Me too," Mogzo yawned.

"Well I don't care what you do. I'm going to stay here and leer at the fine women in this establishment and maybe even do more than looking." Ranta grinned lecherously, waggling his eyebrows in a manner that made Haruhiro uncomfortable.

"Sounds fun," Haruhiro replied flatly. "Don't get into any trouble."

"Yes, yes," Ranta said dismissively. "You overthink everything stupid Haruhiro. If it works out, then everything is fine. Go be your boring self away from me."

Haruhiro rolled his eyes. "See ya, Ranta."

Haruhiro let out a big sigh of relief as he exited the alehouse. The cool air was so refreshing. All he could think about was getting back to his straw bed and covering himself in it and falling asleep.

A gentle tap on his shoulder brought him out of his thoughts.

"Mogzo?"

"I'll walk Shihoru and Yume home. Why don't you make sure Mary gets back safely?" Mogzo suggested. Haruhiro frowned. He forgot that Mary didn't live with them.

"Okay. Thanks Mogzo." Mogzo nodded before heading back to their dormitory behind Yume and Shihoru.

"Mary!" Haruhiro called out, finally finding her. She turned around, a surprised look on her face.

"Haru? Did you need something?"

"I was wondering if you wanted some company on the way back to your lodging. If I recall correctly, it's a bit of a walk," Haruhiro admitted. He hoped she wouldn't say no. Mary appraised him, and under the lamp light, her eye colors seemed to be dark cobalt. The intensity of her gaze made him fidget. It took a decent amount of his willpower not to avert his eyes.

"Okay." Haruhiro breathed a sigh of relief, before falling in step next to her. They walked in companionable silence, neither speaking, nor feeling the need to say anything as well. He liked that about her. Even though she was naturally quiet, it didn't feel awkward at all. He just felt so comfortable in her presence. And quite frankly, he didn't really know what to talk about, nor feel like speaking in general.

He stared off into the night sky, admiring the myriad pinpricks of light twinkling above them. It was times like this where the full scale and magnitude of the world hit him, leaving him in breathless awe.

He feels the warm glow of sympathetic magic wash over him, as Mary wordlessly casts a warming spell over them. He lightly bumps her shoulder with his own.

Thank you.

She smiles and lightly returns the gesture.

All too soon, in his opinion, they reach Mary's housing. She stops at the doorway and turns to face him. They both stare at each other, unsure of what to do next.

"So, good night then," Haruhiro says finally. Mary nods, and offers him another smile.

"Good night. See you tomorrow, Haru."

Haruhiro had trouble falling asleep that night. He tossed and turned, and couldn't find a comfortable enough position. He kept thinking about their second expedition into the mine, and all the things that could go wrong. Would he be able to effectively lead his party?

When he finally did succumb to sleep, he dreamed of a smiling, blue-eyed girl.

****Author's Note:****

****Hey guys! Really happy about the positive feedback I've been receiving from you all. Just wanted to say a "thank you" to everyone that reviewed and followed. It's really encouraging as a writer. ****

****Next chapter, it's back to the Cyrene mines! I'll try my hand at some combat writing, so you guys will see Haruhiro and his team in action. Right now, I'm still kind of struggling to properly characterize and nail the different nuances of the characters, so for now, the story will be through the perspective of Haruhiro, until I feel more comfortable with the other characters. ****

****Once again, thanks!****

****Cheers!****

****~Ace****

End
file.